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AUTHOR Carsrud, Alan L.; Palazzolo, Salvatore A.
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ABSTRACT

Assuming superiority is a function of sex-role, it was hypothesized that "masculines" would prefer aggressive humor against females more than would "androgeneous" or "feminine" subjects. However, results indicated that sex, rather than sex-role, affected preference for humor directed against members of the opposite sex. Several explanations are postulated. (Author)

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Sex and sex-role orientation as determiners of preference for humorous statements: A test of Hobbes Superiority Theory of Humor.

Alan L. Carsrud
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas

Salvatore A. Palazzolo
Georgia Medical College
Augusta, Georgia

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EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
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Sex and sex-role orientation as determiners of preference for humorous statements: A test of Hobbes Superiority Theory of Humor.

What makes a person laugh at a joke or not has been of interest to psychologists and philosophers for centuries. One of the most useful theories was proposed by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes' Superiority Theory (1651) states that persons respond humorously only when he or she, or his or her reference group, is not the object of an aggresive "joke," and therefore one emerges as superior to another person or group. However, the nature of what is a reference group or identification class for men and women is not clear (La Fave, 1972). Bem (1974) implies that a possible reference group for individuals are those persons who hold the same sex-role orientations. Thus, individuals who are masculine in role orientation would prefer jokes directed against those who are feminine, while the reverse would hold for those of feminine sex-role orientation, if we apply Hobbes' theory to these groups. This interpretation can be called the superiority reaction due to reference groups. Research by Zigler, Levine, and Gould (1966, 1967) found no differences between males and females in their abilities to understand and appreciate humor, thus supporting the reference group approach.

However, Bem (1974) also implies that specific sex-roles have certain trans-situational behavioral characteristics which could determine an individual's responses to aggressive humor, independent of reference groups. The masculine type is described as assertive and aggressive, while the feminine type is described as passive and yielding. If we assume that the masculine type denotes feelings of superiority, and the feminine type denotes feelings of non-superiority, then one could expect that the masculine type

would prefer humor directed against feminines. The feminine type could be expected not to prefer any form of aggressive humor. Smith and Goodchilds (1959) and Cupchick and Leventhal (1974) support this view.

In addition, a considerable number of individuals fall between a masculine and a feminine identification (Bem, 1974). These androgynous individuals should not always be as aggressive as the masculines, nor always as passive as the feminines depending on the appropriate situational cues (Bem, 1974). Hence, the androgynous individual should demonstrate only moderate superiority reactions as measured by preferences for aggressive humor directed against feminines and against masculines. This later interpretation could be called the superiority reaction due to personality characteristics that are relatively trans-situational. Freud (1916), among others, supports this view of humor dependent on personality characteristics.

Thus we have a test of two theories of superiority reactions to humor, the superiority from a reference group versus the superiority inheritant in a given personality characteristic.

It was predicted that "superiority" reactions to humorous statements would be strongest in those individuals who had a masculine frame of reference, independnet of biological makeup. Feminine types would be expected to demonstrate the least superiority reactions, with androgynous individuals having only moderate preferences for aggressive humor. This set of hypotheses are based on the results found by Smith and Goodchilds (1959) and Cupchick and Leventhal (1974) where men were found to exhibit humorous reactions to situations while females did not.

Experiment I

The design of this study was a 2 X 3 ANOVA with two levels of sex

(male & female) and three levels of sex-role orientation (masculine, androgynous, and feminine). A group of 240 undergraduates from Texas A&M University were administered Bem's Androgeny Scale. From this a sample of six male-feminines, six female-feminines, six male-androgynes, six female-androgynes, six male-masculines, and six female-masculines were selected. During the second session of the experiment, subjects were handed a forced choice questionnaire containing five male "put-down jokes" and five female "put-down jokes" which had been pretested for equality of humorousness ($p > .50$). Each male joke was paired with each female joke for a total of 25 pairs. Subjects were asked to choose which statement of each pair they would prefer to tell to another person. This method is based on a stimulus centered approach proposed by Torgerson (1958). Typical of the jokes used in this study were the following:

Male "Put-down Joke"

Men are definitely the stronger sex, Nothing can top that muscle they have between their ears!

Female "Put-down Joke"

Man may not be the most superior being on earth, but he sure enough has it over women.

Experiment II

The second study was an exact replication of experiment I. Subjects came from a sample of 450 students at the State University of New York-Brockport. From this a sample of six male-feminines, six female-feminines, six male-androgynes, six female-androgynes, six male-masculines, and six female-masculines were selected.

Results and Discussion

The results for the two studies were highly similar. Data reported

here are for study I. Contrary to predictions, sex-role orientation had no significant effect on preference for humorous statements. However, physical sex (male $\bar{X}$ = 2.5, female $\bar{X}$ = 18.1) did have a significant effect ($F = 32.53$, df 1, 25 $p<.001$) on preference for aggressive humor. Males, regardless of sex-role orientation, preferred humor directed against women, while females, regardless of sex-role preferred humorous statements directed against males. The results can be interpreted to support the concept that the reference groups for men and women are their sex groups (in terms of their superiority reactions to aggressive humor). It is possible that the forced-choice format of the questionnaire did not allow feminine types to show a no preference response. The preference for one humorous statement over another may be due to different motivational status which the forced choice format may conceal (if one adopts a Freudian model-(Freud, 1916)). This interpretation is still conjectural, however.

The results do show that sex, rather than sex-role is predictive of reactions to aggressive humor in a forced-choice situation. The results also indicate that sex-role behavioral characteristics may not be trans-situational as has often been implied by Bem (1974). That is, although an individual may be feminine (non-aggressive) in sex-role oriented situations, that person will prefer jokes directed against persons of the opposite physical sex. Physical sex identification may have been the determiner for responses because the jokes were male/female directed rather than just directed against stereotypic behavior. However, it still leaves the notion of the trans-situational passive behavior of women at least questionable, if not absurd, in resopnses to aggressive humor. Thus the concept of superiority (Hobbes, 1651, may be useful in understanding the social determinants of responses to aggressive humor in terms of identification groups.

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